

'You are you, label free'

Forest Heights Community School's Gay-Straight Alliance students host conference

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CHESTER — What emotions do you think best describe the life experiences of gay youths?

Many people may answer "misery and pain," but the student organizers of Forest Heights Community School's recent Gay-Straight Alliance conference say that simply does not reflect reality for most kids.

Student council president Keith Parker used an example of a poster made by well-meaning adults intended to support gay youths that pictures a newborn baby with a hospital wristband which says "homosexual."

"Just because you're a homosexual, that doesn't mean you're going to have to go through this terrible stage of your life before you get to the rest of your life."

Another poster shows a boy leaning against a dark wall looking sad with a caption about being gay.

"So from that, you take out that you're going to be sad if you're gay, instead of 'Be happy, it's okay to be like that,'" said Kyla Warren, one of the conference organizers.

Images such as this, accompanied by a caption that says something like "That's

so gay, it's yesterday," encourage teens to hide their sexuality for fear of feeling the way the people in the posters feel.

"Exactly, it is so yesterday, so why can't we get on with it? This," said Ms Warren, pointing to the poster, "is keeping everything the same."

She said it's simply not okay anymore to make it seem that every gay or bisexual person is going to be made fun of or be depressed and that's how their life is going to be forever.

"It's okay to be happy. You are you, label free. There's no problem with being who you are and it's time we stop labeling and let people be people."

Positive representation was one of the main themes of the April 10 conference, which was sponsored by South Shore Schools Plus and supported by various community groups, parents, teachers, government officials, businesses and a church.

"This has been a community effort to do what's right," said faculty advisor Ray Johnson.

Besides, inclusion and equity is ultimately not a choice, it's a right.

"What you're seeing is a reflection of what this generation sees that ours didn't," said Mr. Johnson.

"It's time we all grow up."